



LITTLE DIPPER

Little Dipper by **Think-ghastly-thoughts-quietly**

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Summary: He may have come across her at the bar but, really, she isn't his type...Too naive. Too meek. Too strange. Billy/OC

1. Chapter 1: Girl

AN: Binged on Stranger Things season 3. Like in one week. I'm sure I'm writing this for pretty popular reasons: (1) Dacre Montgomery is a babe, and I am willingly adding onto his fanclub (2) asshole w/ abusive past is attractive (3) Billy's redemption arc is unsatisfying (4) try another romance story (5) my mind compels me-it makes me do this. CAN'T STOP. Hope you have fun reading and please review what you think!

Warnings: Billy Hargrove POV (and all that entails), rating subject to change

Chapter One: Girl

Every so often, he will find himself in a bar.

In an empty, mid-America, purgatory where people are bland smiles — God-bless-do-yonder hicks dressed in stained coveralls. A farmhouse odor soils the air as he tips back his glass and the whiskey burns its trail down his throat. Creeps into his limbs. Absorbed by his bones.

From the back, the Rock Ola chirps the strings of Conway Twitty's guitar through its speaker and Billy's scowl is reserved for the bearded patrons with their bellies sagging over their belts.

The echoes of a leather snap rings in his ears and a ghost pain makes his skin tingle causing Billy's hand to tighten around the crystal in his palm and his knuckles pale. He thinks to break it.

"How're you doin', hun?"

Billy looks at the waitress who takes his empty plate and his hand relaxes.

Her bangs float limply on the sides of her face as though the hairspray had worn away. Her makeup is off; the eye shadow smudged. It almost looks like a bruise. He wondered if she only works in this shithole bar in this shithole state because the job was its

own escape from the disgusting things she'd have to face when her shift is over.

One of her brows rise. She's waiting.

Though the glass is empty, he brings it to his face and smirks. Billy likes to make people wait. He derives some control from it.

"Does it matter?"

The waitress purses her thin lips. "I know you ain't from around here."

"God forbid."

"Where're your parents?"

"If you want me to leave, get to the punchline."

The woman's sigh is one that extends the length of the room. "You remind me of my boy."

Except I bet he doesn't land half as many broads as I do.

"As long as you don't get stupid around these regulars," her smile is not as wide as she thinks she's trying to make it, but he supposes it's encouragement— the type of encouragement mothers gift to their sons. These are the smiles that lie the most.

He feels her eyes trail down the bruises coloring his arms. Did that remind her of bad decisions and consequences— did that remind her of her son? He really hopes it will.

"You can stay until closing for all I care," she utters gently, "You're not the first runaway to come 'round here."

As the waitress leaves him, his eyes follow her until they can't. He lowers his glass, stares at the glint of light.

Thinks.

Runaway?

The word is so despicably familiar with its memories that cut and wound. Memories of his hair and his eyes and how they're just really reminders of her— *her* hair, *her* eyes, *her* softness, *her* fairness. Reminders of how he's stuck in po-dunk-ville USA.

Billy feels himself growing increasingly annoyed. His chest flares with heat and he slams the glass onto the table. No one pays attention to the sound it makes.

That's when he decides it's time to leave— not that he sees the clock, not that he thinks it's late, not that he has to register for school tomorrow, but he makes the judgement that he's awake enough and sober enough to make the drive back. He slides into his jacket then out of the booth, striding down a hall leading to the restrooms.

Across the men's side, the women's door swings out and Billy stops a step short of being hit.

At first, he sees the hem of a cream smock dress swaying against knobby knees. Then, the dirt stained sneakers coming to a staggering halt as orange gloved hands press a dark blue book closer to the front of a purple quilted jacket. The girl who wears this nauseating outfit skirts around him with her head ducked low.

The alcohol worming its way into his thoughts puts Billy in a testy mood. Before she's out of reach, his hand snaps to her bare wrist and yanks her back. He hears her gasp, feels the muscle of his palm cramp lightly, but it's all easy to dismiss as he glares at her black hair, a tangled web hiding her face.

"Hey," he says tonelessly.

Wide, startled eyes stare at him.

Suddenly, Billy remembers the last chick he slept with. Blonde. Busty. Hot with air. In his mind, her name is Yesterday Girl, because that's what they're all named. But, none of that was relevant. This girl didn't even look like them.

Billy looks harder, down her shoes, up to her black eyes.

Then, he mutters, "Watch it."

Her bowed lips part and fumble around sounds.

"S-s-...Sorr...mm..."

"What?"

Her forehead wrinkles and her mouth presses together as her face tenses. She stammers the word.

"...Sor— ry..."

He lets her go and brushes past. As he enters the restroom, the corner of his eye catches her purple jacket sliding out of view. And then the door shuts.

. — . — . — .

As Billy passes his booth, he's really just trying to avoid the attention. He sidles around the back of the bar, avoiding the row of drunk, rowdy fuckers in the front.

Then, the waitress intercepts him. He sees her on his peripherals and he halts. She puts her hand on his arm, refrains from squeezing too hard.

"I'm not trying to be nosy, kid."

Billy looks at her, hears the powdered sympathy sprinkled in her voice and feels disgusted.

He steps to the side, out of her reach and her hand falls.

"Then don't," he replies.

The waitress stares at him and he wonders what she sees.

"Wherever you're goin', you better think hard on where it'll take you." Her face softens with compassion and a few years are given back to her visage.

How many times has she used the same line on her son, Billy wonders.

"Yeah, whatever..." he mutters and he makes his way to the exit. The door is only half open when the waitress says:

"You take care of her."

He stops in the doorway and his eyes flick back over his shoulder.

"Who?"

The waitress crosses her arms and ticks her chin towards the main window.

"Your girl."

There's absolutely no humor in her tone, it's every bit serious. But, it doesn't encourage in him a revelation. When Billy follows her line of sight, he sees her — palms pressed against the glass. Her face, framed by her arrow straight hair, implores him.

He returns his attention to the waitress and she does it again; that cock of the brow.

She's waiting.

Billy doesn't hesitate. He's out the door and he ignores the girl all the same.

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He tells himself he shouldn't care, that he's not interested in some hick's teenage daughter with a bad taste in fashion. But, when he walks to his car he hears her timid footsteps down the wooden treads leading to the parking lot, echoes to his own. She stops as he does.

"You," he says, turning fully.

Her eyes avert to the ground.

"Yes," she stammers quickly.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"Yes?"

"It's not a 'yes' or 'no' question," Billy says, "Why are you following me?"

She nods.

Billy narrows his eyes. What a drag. He doesn't really have time to deal with someone who's stupid.

He doesn't know why this angers him, but the way she stands there in front of his car. Still clutching that stupid book...

Vulnerable. It's odd how readily the word comes to mind.

How it incites him.

Suddenly, he can't help himself— his eyes act out of their own accord. Notes her meek posture. Her awkward state of dress. Her delicate expression. Her thin ankles. She is a doll. Like an old doll with an empty stare and pouty lips, the ones people don't buy anymore because they look too sad and no one wants to look at a sad thing that reminds them of themselves.

"I'm out of here." His hand grips the driver's side door.

"Wait!" she cries.

Billy looks at her quizzically.

There's a watery film over her eyes that makes them shine. She digs her hand into her pocket and pulls out a wad of paper.

"P-p-please..."

Billy marches to her. When he is within arms reach she flinches as he swipes the paper out of her hand. He unravels it and discovers the twenty dollar bill.

He looks at her.

"What do you want?"

She grimaces out the word.

"Haw...k-kins."

AN: So, the girl does have a stutter. My depiction of this speech impediment is only accurate to my experiences when I was in middle-school and through my college friend. Also, I can't imagine what it would have been for people with speech impediments back in the 80s, but I'd assume someone with a temperament like Billy wouldn't have much patience for it. Hopefully you liked it; I welcome your thoughts. Based on audience reception, I might continue this. Thanks a bunch!

2. Chapter 2: Caution, do not touch

AN: Yo, thanks for the follows yall. TakeEmAway, glad this has grabbed your attention, hope it will continue to do so! Promise chapter three is going to be longer, I just have to edit it but definitely going to wait until Friday. Weekly update rule maintains my sanity. And as always, reviews are welcome!

Chapter Two: Caution, do not touch

October air streamlines through the spaces between his fingers while the music blares from the radio, its riotous din rising with the roar of the engine.

While the camaro storms down the highway, its lights on full beam cutting through the gloom, Billy tosses a glance to the passenger seat and sees the girl sinking into the upholstery with her chin dipped underneath the collar of her jacket.

"What? Car sick?" He shouts over the scream of wind tousling his hair.

She tears her eyes from the road. The anxiety in her face as she turns her head tempts him to laughter. Instead, he grins, focuses ahead as his tongue sweeps across his bottom lip.

"Too late for regrets."

"C-c-could you s-s-slow down?"

"C-c-could I what?" Billy mocks. "Sorry— beggars can't be choosers."

Her frown betrays her disappointment and he delights in it. It keeps him amused the next several miles. Until, he notices her posture gradually relax. The death grip on her seatbelt loosens. The edge of the town looms in his vision and it's all the reminder that the fun is about to end.

His shit-bird stepsister might never get used to the way he speeds, but Billy doesn't like that his new tag-along is finding this a little old. This alone causes his foot to floor the brake and as the car screeches

to a halt, she squeaks and her face lurches forward, grazing the dash.

It's her glare which makes Billy think this is the easiest twenty he's ever made.

"Thought I saw a deer." He shrugs as his amusement bleeds off. "My bad."

Whatever insult is on her mind, she forgoes her annoyance and silently unbuckles her seatbelt and gathers the large blue book at her feet which had tumbled off her lap. Billy sees her intentions before she can act on them and doesn't know why his chest aches at seeing her leave.

Please don't do this...

...come home...

A girl has never walked out on him. It's always been the other way around. It's a principle of his. Billy has sustained that since he was a freshman. And he's kept it up for far too long to let it fall apart now. So, when she turns her body away from him, hand latched onto the handle, Billy punches the button which locks the doors. He takes a fistful of her sleeve and she whips back around.

"Where do you think you're going?" he snaps.

Her head tips down to his hand. Then, looks at him.

"Walking," she says quickly, before a parasitic stutter can hijack her tongue.

"We had a deal." Ironically, he doesn't uphold deals— not often, at least. And a measly amount of cash isn't what makes him adamant to take her wherever the hell she wants in Hawkins. He just wanted to be the one to tell her to get the hell out of his car for the sake of telling her. That's what he calls amusement when he's half sober.

But, her gloved hand comes up to his wrist, lightly touches it to coax him to release his fist.

Billy finds it jarring when she says:

"No...B-but, thank you."

If it isn't enough, she pats his shoulder and her face brightens. She's fine with it, she's grateful...

She's fine with leaving...

...but he tells himself it's all a lie and that type of thinking darkens his face. In the troubled corridors of his mind, a match strikes and sets the fuse.

His fist on her jacket tightens, twists more fabric.

The girl senses a change and her contented expression falls away.

She becomes scared and her body shifts further to the door.

"L-l-let me go, Billy."

At the sound of his name, his anger fizzles out and Billy doesn't think about his mother anymore. His fist loosens, but his hold on her arm is still firm.

"How do you know?"

Suddenly, her face takes on the fragility of porcelain and Billy knows he's caught her in a lie. She lowers her gaze to her book. He briefly notices her lashes aren't clumped, aren't caked with that black paint the girls his age apply to look fuller.

"Look at me when I'm talking to you."

She obeys. This time, there is a warbling smile on her lips.

"M-m-my n-name is Louise," she offers lamely.

His jaw locks into place. "Is that what I asked?"

She flushes with embarrassment.

For all Billy knows, he's never met this girl before tonight. Unless, she was the sister of someone he fucked recently. But, he doubts that. He hasn't been here long enough for his name to work its way through

Hawkins.

"Tell me..." He demands through locked teeth.

Her brows knit together. Mouth presses. She's not attempting to speak; she's trying not to and it spurns him on.

When she looks away again, his body tenses and he captures her jaw in a bruising grip.

"I said look at me when I'm—"

The last thing he sees is her frightened eyes before his throat closes up and every muscle in his body contracts under the charge of a violent current. The music playing from the radio thins out into silence. And once gold and white arcs his vision, Billy is whisked away into a dream.

3. Chapter 3: What's in a name?

AN: FULL DISCLAIMER if it wasn't made obvious before— I own nothing. But, I might have to owe the Duffer Brothers for giving me the brilliant plot and universe. I appreciate all the follows/favs! And thank you to the following: A-pistachio-eclair, Idontknoworcareanymore, and TakeEmAway, you guys are ever encouraging!

Chapter Three: What's in a name?

In this darkness, the warm pressure against his side eases him and the summer lilt of his mother's laughter beckons him to the surface. It's a liquid caress lulling his thoughts.

Then, the presence withdraws. Leaves him cold.

And the corridors rot.

. — . — . — .

The breath of a dying season prances into his room through the open window and Billy jolts awake, with his legs tangled in the sheets of his bed. He gathers his bearings slowly. His dazed eyes rove the walls and the debased posters, in search of nothing. With a groan, Billy decides that whatever he'd taken at the bar, he hopes he won't be fool enough to fill his cup with it again.

Across the hall, the toilet flushes and Billy kicks off the blanket, rolls off the side of the mattress and staggers into the bathroom, shoves the door in. Max's scream raids his ears like a siren.

Billy glowers at her. "SHUT. UP."

Standing in her cartoon print pajamas, Max brandishes her toothbrush like a weapon with one hand curled around the edge of the sink.

Moron, he thinks.

"I was here first!"

"Think I care?" He drags her out into the hall by the shoulder, ignoring her high-pitched protests as he shuts her off with a slam of the door.

In the privacy of the bathroom, Billy leans over the sink and drinks water from the faucet. When he catches his reflection, he's briefly disgusted to find that he's in the same clothes he left the house yesterday.

With his outfit discarded in a pile on the floor, he cranks the shower valve all the way to the left and enters the pattering stream. Lets his mind fogs up like the mirror as he washes himself. If there's a passing thought, he doesn't really think about it too hard, until Max pounds on the door while he's rinsing his hair.

"Wait your turn, loser."

But, the little shit is insistent. So, he shuts off the shower and exits. Heat convects off his wet skin as he wraps a towel around his waist and opens the door to his stepsister whose nose wrinkles at the sight of him.

"What?" Billy asks.

Although she's dressed, little effort is put into her hair and he doubts she brushed her teeth and for this reason, Billy never wonders why she doesn't have a boyfriend.

Max taps the top of her wrist, upper lip curling.

"We're gonna be late."

"For *what*?"

"For school."

"School doesn't start until Tuesday."

"But, mom wants—"

Billy pushes Max out of the way and strides into his room. She doesn't follow, doesn't dare to with all the times he threatened her in

California if she did, yet he still shuts the door. Billy rifles through his drawers for a pair of jeans and a flannel, and tosses both onto the bed.

"Your ass better be ready in fifteen or you enroll on your own. By the way, it's a long walk to school," he warns as he searches through a stack of unpacked boxes for a belt, but the first box doesn't provide. When his feet brush against his boots, he can't remember taking them off when he came home. As he navigates around his room, he freezes.

"Billy!" Max calls, but her irritating voice falls on deaf ears.

Last night is a flicker through his eyes and everything comes in such a brutal rush he almost backs away in alarm if it weren't for the fact that even through all the racket of his sister's screams there was a girl still blissfully and ignorantly asleep on the floor with one of his spare blankets curled around her shoulders and her jacket bunched to pillow her head. Her gloves and shoes are neatly placed beside her, the blue book lays on top. His eyes sneak past the dress riding up to the crest of her thighs and past all the easy feminine curves that lead to the edge of her underwear...

"BILLY!"

He sweeps to the door and opens it. If he looks half as annoyed and impatient as he feels, it could explain why Max hesitates.

"Gonna stand there looking like an idiot?" Billy sneers. "What do you want?"

Then, she snaps out of it.

"You left the bathroom dirty." Max replies with her arms crossed. "I'm not cleaning after you again!"

A growl surges up his throat.

"You're down to ten minutes, shitbird."

The door slams again, and when he pivots on his heel, he finds her charcoal eyes pinned on him from the other end of the room. They stare at each other in silence.

She's sitting so still on the ground with the blanket clutched to her chest he doesn't think her breathing— more or less think her alive— until he sees her line of sight waver to his towel hung low around his hips. The gesture is telling and Billy feels flattered. Then, he isn't. Because he remembers the night before, the utterance of his name, his skin meeting hers...The blackout.

"What did you do to me?" He asks.

Underneath the blanket swaddling her upper body, he sees her shoulders tense. She looks away. And he hates that she retreats from his gaze as though he's losing her attention.

Billy rounds on her before she can contemplate running, and like he'd done with so many classmates in school, he pins her to the ground. He feels her labored breaths from her stomach after he settles his weight on her.

"We can do this the easy way or the hard way. But, don't make me repeat myself again."

His fingers sink into her shoulders as the panic writes out on her face.

"D-don't touch!"

Billy's hands still. He can't accept taking orders from a girl, but there's a desperation in her broken voice that pleads more for his sake than hers.

"What. Happened?"

In such close proximity to her, it's all he can do to not think about her body... Or yesterday girl. Or the cheap thrill before that.

"I drove y-you after you...went...asleep."

Billy grimaces. 'Asleep' is one way to put it.

"Because you did something," he says.

Her frown is etched with rue.

"Y-yes."

Who would know what she had done to him. How she knew his name. Where he lived. Billy can't deign to wonder about that— not this early in the goddamn morning, but he knows... He knows she's different in some way he can't explain and it makes his stomach shift uneasily. Out of all the questions storming in his brain, he asks:

"Why'd you stay?"

His wet hair drips water onto her cheeks as a wrinkle forms between her brows.

"T-t-to make s-sure you're...okay..." She admits.

The answer doesn't impress him. At least, that's what Billy tells himself.

"You're going to leave after this," he says. "I'm going to drop you off downtown, and you're not coming back here. Do you understand?"

If it's hurt that's on her face, he doesn't give it the time of day. Although small, he detects her nod, which settles the plan even though he's not particularly satisfied with the finality of it.

When he rises, the towel unravels from his hips and as it flutters to the floor, the girl pipes, hands slapping over her eyes while her skin colors with embarrassment.

"Grow up," Billy scoffs, snatching up the towel and walking over to his bed. As he readies, she commits her blank stare outside his window like it's her way of giving him privacy he hasn't asked for. Once he's done, he finds his keys sitting on the bedside table and scoops them into his palm.

"Billy! You said ten minutes!"

A split second of conflict festers in his thoughts—

If his Dad ever finds out she was here...

— and then dies as he goes to the girl, close enough that she senses

him and turns her head.

"You don't say a word to Max."

The girl furrows her brows. It didn't look like she registered his message, so he kneels, leveling his stare. Around her, he's incredibly wary of his hands, which is strange because he's never had to think twice about how he touched people before this.

"Got— it?" He repeats, but she never has the chance to agree.

"Eleven minutes!" Max intones from the living room.

Billy groans and grabs the girl's elbow, covered by the sleeve of her dress.

"M-my s-s-stuff," she bleats as Billy pulls her away.

"Hurry up."

He releases her.

She tramples over his things, sends him an apologetic glance, and slips on her shoes, her gloves, picks up the book and jacket hastily. She smiles at him when she finishes.

He spots it again. The gratitude. But, Billy realizes he's not as angry seeing it as he was the first time. He doesn't grab for her when they leave and as he weaves past unpacked boxes in the hallway, she follows closely behind. When he enters the living room, Max is already yelling.

"Twelve min—"

"God, do you hear yourself?" Billy asks snidely as he walks to the front door.

He doesn't look at the shift in Max's expression when she sees the stranger in their house, but he imagines her disbelief and revels in the fact that he'll never need to answer to it.

"Uh...Who are...?" Max falters at his glare and her question dissolves.

Then, Billy proceeds outside with the girl trailing close on his heels.

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While Max locks the front door, Billy says, "You're sitting in the back."

"Seriously?" she mutters.

Billy cocks a brow. "What was that?"

Max's eyes tighten— she knows that provoking an argument with him always results in her losing.

"Nothing."

Billy looks forward at the car parked parallel to the curb, the driver's side facing him. The three of them cross the walkway. He leads. On approach, Max and the girl round the front of the car to the passenger side. He's already settled into the driver's seat, keying the ignition when he sees Max halted at the door with her attention pinned somewhere along the rear of his car and her mouth shaped into an 'o'.

He leans over the passenger seat and rolls down the window.

"What the fuck, Max? Let's go."

His palm hammers into the center of the steering wheel.

At the sound of the car horn, Max jumps as though she's been shocked and she wrenches open the door, plopping clumsily into the backseat while the girl slips in after her, closes the door and buckles in. She assumes the same position she had when she first entered his car. Knees pressed together. Hands cupped over them. Book situated on her lap. He interprets her for being eager. But, for what?

The drive?

Does she find it amusing?

Billy rolls his eyes for even wondering about something so pointless

as the camaro rolls forward.

. — . — . — .

The back alley of a pizza parlor. That's where he stopped. And the girl unbuckles herself. She stares at the dash for a moment. Then, turns to him.

"Thank you."

Billy's eyes are fixed ahead.

She doesn't wait for an acknowledgement and merely opens the door. As she steps out, she waves at his stepsister who's staring at her like an idiot. Before Billy thinks back on what he'd told her in his room, she says:

"B-Bye, Max."

And the door swings, but she's already scuttled to the front of the building when it finally shuts. It's a bother being annoyed, but Billy is. And he's only momentarily distracted when Max asks:

"What's her name?"

As the camaro whips out of the alley and onto the main strip, he answers:

"Nobody cares."

Except...

Billy knows...

She is named 'Louise.'

4. Chapter 4: Learning Through Others

AN: FINALLY. I've been waiting to get to sad little awkward Louise.

Chapter Four: Learning through others

If Louise has learned about the world, it's that the people are strange. No, really. They are. Wherever she turns. Whatever town she ends up. Whoever pities her enough to give her a ride. But, it's pretty much established that they must think she's strange too. Old news, but no biggie. She'd learned to get over it once. After Billy, she can learn to get over it again. She'll never see him again for her sake and for his, a fact which brings her some solace.

As she walks along the strip, Louise feels the eyes of a passing group of girls rove down her clothes. One whispers to the others, and together their laughter is ridicule. She wants to duck her head, but Louise keeps looking forward because she can't look down at her feet and afford to miss something important.

As she approaches a store, sees the people inside, she tugs off the leather material clinging to her fingertips. And one glove after the other, Louise's hands are bare and there is a light taste of dread on her tongue as she swallows nervously.

. — . — . — .

At this hour, the store stands empty. Customers aren't scouring the aisles, no one waits at the register. No one asks where to locate Preparation H. So, Joyce sits in the back and eats the sack lunch she prepared for herself even though it isn't even nine o'clock, and she thinks back on when Will— and then thinking further back on when Jonathan — depended on her to fill their Evel Knievel lunch boxes.

After she lifts her cold sandwich to her mouth, a sound at the storefront prevents her from a bite and though this is her break, Jeffrey had called in sick and Mr. Melvald wouldn't return until this afternoon— she puts down her meal and investigates the commotion, in part hoping it might be Bob.

When she scuttles out, Joyce sees a girl crouched down to pick up the toiletries she had dropped with the curtain of her hair sweeping down to the floor.

"Are you alright there?" Joyce asks.

"...I'm s-s-sorry," she says.

Joyce watches her scramble and then notices a dropped book, sitting several feet away from her. The title reads, "Treatise on Electricity and Magnetism. Vol II." Her fingers curl around the edge and picks it up.

"M-may I have it b-b-back?" The girl eyes the book nervously. A bottle of shampoo slips from her arms and clatters to the ground.

Joyce smiles.

"Let me get you a basket."

. — . — . — .

As she tills up the cash register, punches in the price of the backpack, she comments, "I don't think I've seen you around here. Are you new?"

But, Joyce doesn't just think. There isn't a face in Hawkins which hasn't entered through Melvald's at least once, and it'd come easy to her over the years to single out the newcomers.

Yet, the girl merely shrugs.

"Big travel pack." Joyce gestures to the choice items scattered on the counter. "Want all of this in here?"

"Yes, p-please."

Her stutter reminds Joyce of when Jonathan finally grew out of his in middle school. Oh how cruel the children were to him before.

When Joyce announces the price, she is handed a fifty, and wonders if she had ever given her sons so much money to spend at once. As

she hands back the change, she sees the girl's gaze flicker to her name tag.

"Th-thank you... Joyce."

"Of course."

She considers the girl once more. "What is your name?"

When she stows the cash in the deep pockets of her jacket and slips on the backpack, the corners of her mouth lift into a smile. She becomes the happiest customer Joyce has seen this week, and it makes her question back on her words, if there was something else she asked besides for her name.

"Louise," she says in an eager rush.

Joyce admires her energy.

"Well then, Louise, I hope you enjoy your stay in Hawkins." Joyce says with a firm nod and extends her hand, "It's nice meeting you."

But, Louise never reaches for Joyce's hand because the bell of the front door clinks noisily, distracting them both.

"Joyce!"

It's the sight of Jim Hopper which forces the sigh through her nose.

"Pepto..."

When she looks at him, he spreads his palms with impatience.

"C'mon on! *Pepto!*"

"Back of aisle three, top shelf," Joyce says.

Hopper runs in the direction instructed.

When she turns back, the girl is leaving through the front. One of her shoe laces drag on the ground. She thinks to warn her, but Hopper curses and Joyce turns her face with a roll of her eyes.

"Jesus..." he grumbles, "I didn't ask for Preparation H."

. — . — . — .

A man looked at his watch and muttered that the bus was late and it makes her look down at her bare wrist. Maybe, if Louise had one in the beginning she wouldn't have missed all those trains and buses.

As she sits on a street bench with her heels bouncing, Louise feels ever self conscious of how she acts. From her visit through the city, it was so easy to blend into the crowd away from prying eyes. Yet, here in this town, where the population and the residents are closely knit with their private lives embedded in social circles, where everyone knows everyone, the danger of standing out becomes more clear and present to her.

"Hi there."

Louise looks at the man sitting beside her.

"Just realized my watch has died. Do you have the time?"

"No," she answers.

"Great."

She recognizes the sarcasm, but instantly thinks Billy's use of it is worse.

"S-sorry."

The man looks at her as she notes his style: the sweater vest, the pin striped collar shirt, top button closed, the hair on his face, his haircut.

"Oh no. I'm the fool who didn't pay attention. Should've known better with this old thing. Ought to get it replaced." the man chuckles warmly and his gaze slips.

"Say, that's a bit of heavy reading."

Louise looks at her lap and the unassuming book.

"Electricity is still so new to us," he adds, "And yet, we've been pushed forward at least ten technological generations with it. Interesting stuff, really. How far along are you? Have you reached the part about conduction in the third dimension?"

Louise smiles uneasily.

No, I haven't. You're asking the wrong person.

This is the answer she wishes she could say without reducing to a stuttering, stumbling mess.

But, instead what comes out is:

"Y-yes."

It's simple, it's clean. And it's a lie.

"Are you a student of Hawkins High?"

She shakes her head.

"J-just moved." It's another lie, but wouldn't it be better that way?
"Pretty...uh...new here."

"Was about to say, I've never seen those kids carry something like that. Wish my class would. Everyone knows who Einstein is and E=mc², and Newton and the apple. But the average person has no idea who Maxwell is or how prolific his contributions are to physics and modern society."

Louise sees a window. The opportunity.

"Y-you sound like...a t-teacher?"

The man is aglow with pride. "Most certainly!"

"What d-do you teach?"

"The middle school sciences. History and english aren't as fascinating to me. Really, couldn't have it any other way, don't you think?"

"Yes."

A pleased smile is sent her way and she can't help her own from forming on her face. No one has ever spoken to her for this long before in one sitting.

Then, he perks up at the sound of the bus shaking on its axle, rolling to a stop in front of them.

"Well, this is my ride."

"Cool."

"Hopefully, I'll be able to have my car up. Beats having to take this to and from school everyday. Don't know how you kids do it," the man says.

"Me neither," she replies.

Looking over his shoulder, he sees the bus driver tap the steering wheel, watching him expectantly with a grimace.

The next he speaks, his hand also moves and her heart thuds because she's been waiting for this and her hand responds too, lifting from her lap.

"Mr. Clarke, by the way. And you are?"

"I...I'm Louise."

"Nice meeting you, Louise. I hope you find Maxwell worth it. See you around, maybe." Mr. Clarke says.

When their palms meet, the world falls away around her, blowing in a welter of sensations that aren't her own. Images scroll past and she's swimming upstream through the current of his memories.

Fall science experiment. Space exhibit poster. Burnt carpet scent permeates the air inside the car— did he wear out the brakes? Amateur radio station in his house unfinished, sits with dust collecting— Extra equipment for the AV club. Four boys. Children laugh, at least those who are paying attention. He meets her eyes and says "Definitely, Jen, I'll see you after work." AV Club. "Alright, class, today's lesson we'll focus on..."Four children. Will Byers is missing? Does he mark him as absent or remove

him from the list? Four children. The air conditioning unit is broken in his house. Mike's swedish? Girl in pink dress, and blonde locks. Poor kids must miss Will. The news channel blares with a picture of a boy, announces Will Byers is found— happiest day for Hawkins— especially for Joyce and Jonathan; his brother used to be in his class— to see him all grown up now. Girl in pink dress. "Look, I hate doing this to you, but it's detention for all of this week until—"Girl in pink dress.

But her face, her face is—

Within the second of the touch, she's sucked back out when she hears:

"Take care."

Before she knows it, Mr. Clarke had released her hand and hopped onto the bus.

As it leaves, Louise groans because her brain feels as though it's sloshing around in her skull. Something drips onto the back of her hand, wet and lukewarm and she looks down at the drop of blood, stark red against her skin. Another drop falls from her nose. Another. Falling splat onto the cover of the book. But, she ignores it. Instead flips it to page eleven and focuses on the photograph taken from the file Mother had given her.

Louise feels light as she swipes the back of her hand across her nose runny with blood and thinks:

She's here.

. — . — . — .

The motel she finds is located next to an arcade and the children flock through the front doors as she sits at the window and waits for her hair to dry. Water stains the back of her slip, the one she always wears underneath the smock dress that is drying on the bathroom curtain rod. Louise had thought of washing her sneakers too, but imagined they would get dirty anyway.

"Ta. Ta. Ta. Ta."

Each syllable fogs up the glass in front of her mouth.

"Fa. F-Fa. F—"

Then, her stomach growls.

But, Louise knows she can't do anything about it. She had blown two days in a matter of hours at Joyce's store, but she doesn't regret the decision. Being clean matters more to her than going hungry. And bacteria can poison her and she might die...or so Mother had said.

The thought of Mother and death hits Louise over the heart, and a sort of loneliness resonates in her chest. She hikes her feet up to the seat of the chair, resting her forehead against her knees while the laughter of children leaks through the window and swallows the sound of her cries.

. — . — . — .

She spends the majority of her late morning and afternoon watching a program featuring dancing men and women on the TV. By the time evening arrives, she dons her dried dress and takes everything with her. Louise can't risk someone stealing from her again— that would really just suck and she's had enough bad days.

Though she'd told herself she could forgo buying food, she's walking down the mainstrip of town to eventually find a moderately empty diner further down along on the same street as the motel. It's good that no one notices her enter except for the waitress who guides her to a booth and hands her a menu. She stares at it for ten minutes, deciding what might be good for her, what might not, and what might kill if she's allergic. But, Louise doesn't know if she's allergic to anything. Mother only warned her of the possibility that she could be.

And within those ten minutes, she doesn't notice another customer walking in with a young girl behind him, or how the waitress discreetly eyes his fitted jeans, or how the two settle into a booth five down from hers, because Louise is deciding on a bowl of fruit or eggs, because those were things Mother had fed her. She was safe with those.

When the waitress clears her throat, Louise lowers her menu.

If her breath catches, it's only because someone stares at her from ten yards away with rage so frightening in his crystal blue eyes, she inherently shivers. A red head turns and the face is young and fills with recognition upon spotting Louise.

Whatever the waitress had said, Louise had already bolted out of her seat through the entrance. She manages to the middle of the parking lot and that's as far as she makes, before his cologne hits her full force and her heels leave the ground.

Billy wrings her by the front of her jacket and his snarl is vicious.

"What the hell did you do to my car?"

Louise can only think: *So much for avoiding him.*

UP NEXT:

"N-no."

Billy makes a rude noise as he steps closer to Max. "Don't stutter. You're starting to sound like her."

"Like your girlfriend?"

A flash of anger crosses his face, but thankfully, he doesn't say anything else, doesn't berate her.

He only barks— he's best at it. "Get in the fucking car."

5. Chapter 5: Don't Tell Dad

Chapter Five: Don't tell Dad

He might not see it, but Max's lips are pursed in thought and Billy already knows she won't drop the matter until she gets an explanation. But, Max is shit out of luck because nobody tells him to explain himself.

"If you tell Dad, you're dead meat, Mayfield."

Max cocks a brow.

"You like her?"

It's a question Max needs to ask because her bedroom is next to his and she'd like to know whether she'll be able to sleep.

But, Billy laughs harshly.

"You kidding?"

"It was an honest question."

He stops laughing.

"You're an idiot." *You're an idiot because I don't even know her.* But then Billy asks himself how many times he's been with a girl, fished her to his room, and called her his girlfriend the next day without even knowing her name? Probably, every time. But, Louise is different.

She's different because she's not his type.

Because it's her plain, unpainted face. Because it's how she chatters like a broken record. Because he hates her purple jacket. Her nose was too flat. Her voice was too soft just like the skin on the underside of her jaw. Because he can't shake away the ghost warmth of her stomach between his legs. And because her underwear was pink and the color is hard on his eyes.

And he's happy he'll never have to see her again.

But, Max is thinking differently.

Max thinks the only time Billy denies liking a girl he just met is when she rejects him first.

. — . — . — .

The drive to school is relatively quiet after that. As quiet as it can be with the car stereo pounding its notes into her ears. But, Max never bothers to tell Billy to turn it down because he wouldn't listen if she tried. Once they arrive, he shuts it off, and Max slips out of the car from the back, and closes the door, pretending she doesn't see the dent on his bumper.

And hopes he doesn't too.

. — . — . — .

But, Billy ends up seeing it on their way out. Even though it was inevitable, Max doesn't know how he could from the distance they were approaching. Maybe it's the way the sun reflects differently on the warped metal. Maybe, he's telepathically connected to it. Either way, Billy looks confused, which is rare and it usually means it's bothering him more than he's letting on. Considering he worked every day last summer and the earlier part of his Junior year working up his savings for that chick magnet and Max can see why he's treated it better than all of his failed relationships combined. And why this is gradually pissing him off.

He walks up to the dent. Stares at it. And to Max's surprise, he's eerily calm, but she wants to steer clear of it in advance— otherwise she might have to save up her allowance for another skateboard. Right now though, while there's still enough length on the fuse leading to the bomb which is her stepbrother, Max tries not to look at him, because the muscles of her face are wrestling with a grin. And losing.

"Something funny?"

Her smiles drops when she meets his glare.

"N-no."

Billy makes a rude noise as he steps closer to Max. "Don't stutter. You're starting to sound like her."

"Like your girlfriend?"

A flash of anger crosses his face, but thankfully, he doesn't say anything else, doesn't berate her.

He only barks— he's best at it. "Get in the fucking car."

She's never settled in the passenger seat so fast in her life and stares at her hands folded in her lap so that Billy can't see the dash of humor on her lips.

Yup, Max thinks, she definitely rejected him.

. — . — . — .

They'd returned home and separated to their rooms to unpack. These afternoons when their parents aren't home are always the worst. Max is always hypersensitive of what she does, where she goes so that she doesn't run into Billy by accident who might say something nasty that would cause her to shut herself in her room and scream into her pillow for the rest of the evening.

But, Billy is just as preoccupied as she is. He hasn't even taken out his cassette player to blast his stupid music. By the time she's finished packing, flattened all the boxes and put them in a stack in the living room, Billy is still silently holed up. So, she knocks and hears a muted curse on the other side. Max leans an ear, but the door whooshes open so fast she stumbles forward a little, but never crosses the threshold. That would be suicide.

Billy stares at her impatiently in only his jeans. And Max wonders what he was doing that made his skin look all shiny and flushed and his hair messy and limp.

"I'm hungry."

Billy looks at her stonily.

He grunts. "Not my problem."

As his door closes, Max thinks fast. "Mom said you'd take me out for food."

"Make your own."

"I can't. There's nothing in the fridge."

What comes out of his mouth is half a sigh and a growl, and whenever she hears that she knows he's conceding.

Max doesn't show it, but she's smug.

. — . — . — .

When they arrive to the diner, the waitress looks at her step-brother like he's a piece of meat that's been braised, drizzled with gravy and served with mashed potatoes on the side. One would think living with someone like Billy she was used to it, but Max gets sick every time.

Thankfully, a big thankfully, Billy doesn't spare the girl a passing glance and only walks over to the corner booth rather than at one of the open tables. Max thinks he prefers sitting against the wall because it gives him a better view of the customers. Makes it easier for him to judge them.

As she looks at the menu, she has an idea of what she wants. Pancakes. Eggs. Steak. A chocolate shake. Basket of fries. She doesn't intend to be shy with her order. Billy's going to end up paying anyway because that's what her mom gave him the twenty for. And if her mom finds out he abused the allowance, then Neil will find out, and Max knows that's the last thing Billy wants.

"Make a decision, shit bird. Once she gets done serving her, she'll come over here," Billy says.

She looks at him. "Have you decided what you're going to have?" Max asks dryly.

"I'm not hungry."

Then, Max sees his eyes narrow past her and his hands atop the table

curl into fists. It's not a good sign. And when she twists in her seat, there's a girl several booths away from them and she looks at her step-brother like he's the coming of the Anti-Christ.

Max feels sorry for her, but a bit of criminal amusement abounds at seeing her run and even more when Billy chases her because he's never chased after girls. At least...never like this.

"Billy, come on, leave her alone," Max calls to his back.

But, in usual Billy Hargrove fashion, he's an impulsive prick, and he doesn't listen to anyone even if it makes a lick of sense. So, Max reluctantly follows.

And when she reaches the parking lot, Billy has seized her by her front, yells into her face, and fear is injected into Max's chest. But, it's not for the girl. It's for what happens afterwards, when she sees a hand grab Billy's wrist and he cries out in pain.

UP NEXT:

"Tell me," Billy urges, and his hand trails down her knee with deliberate slowness, sliding down to her hem.

"Or I'll touch you." He threatens, his voice low.

6. Chapter 6: Anger Issues

AN: Billy's malice aforethought is gonna be all over the place in this chapter.

Chapter Six: Anger Issues

Each nerve convulses and tingles as Billy reels back and clutches his arm. While he scrambles for his bearings, another's shadow overlaps his—

Max approaches hesitantly with the sunset on her back.

"Billy...what happened?" A question which sounds more curious than concerned.

But, he doesn't answer. He's too focused on Louise, of how her hands are clutched to her chest and her eyes are wide and apologetic and her bowed mouth moves from a delicate frown, but Billy can't stand it.

"Don't fucking say it," he seethes as he drops his arm. Flexes his fingers. The pain eases, but he'll never forget the sensation because what fucking idiot would do that and risk repeating the same mistake?

"S-say what?" Louise inquires softly.

He hopes he's looking at her like she's stupid. She deserves that, at least.

"I know you're not sorry, so don't say it," he clarifies.

"B-but..." Louise purses her lips, for a moment's thought. "I am. I want to make— up for it," she offers.

A number of ideas went through his mind, but he doesn't voice any of them aloud.

"How?" he jostles her with the question that makes her expression turn cautiously pensive.

"How much?" Louise asks.

"Five hundred. Now. " It's an over-inflated number but it's the first that came to mind.

She frowns. "F-fine...I c-can d-do that."

He suspects it's not her natural stutter chopping her response. He suspects it's hesitation. And that's why his irritation spikes because he hates lies and he thinks she's not above lying to assuage him.

"Lousy cheat," he spits out.

"Huh?"

"You heard me. I'm calling your fucking bluff. Do you think I'm an idiot?"

He sees her face at a new angle as she tilts her chin upwards in a subtle demonstration of boldness. "I think...There's p-plenty y-you don't know."

"Really?" Billy's sneer twists with malice and if Louise felt daring before she isn't showing it now. "Coming from the girl who doesn't know how to fucking drive? That's pure gold."

Louise looks particularly guilty then.

"I've never drove before...b-but... you at least g-got home."

"Why'd you let her drive in the first place?" Max asks.

Max, shut up. But, it never shoots past his teeth because he actually considers if there was any way he could have prevented this.

And he hates the deluge of questions surging through his head, the ones which imply he should be held accountable for anything that turned out against his favor— because... maybe he really shouldn't have put his hands on Louise like that. Maybe he should've known better. Maybe should have driven slower. And, all of this would be valid to ask in another world. But, Billy knows that the only mistake he made was—

"I should've left you at that bar," he says.

The crinkle between her brows and the pout of her lips, and the glassy sheen of tears stinging her eyes doesn't abate as she nods her head stiffly.

"Y-you're right." She says in a voice that sounds like its about to shatter and whatever discomfort Billy feels spreading cold in his chest, he doesn't allow himself to outwardly show it.

Then, Louise reaches into her pocket and pulls a couple bills, pinches it with her thumb and forefinger and stretches out her arm.

She looks at him readily and Billy steps forth with great caution, because he damn well knows his lesson now.

"Sor-sorry for...everything," she says.

It's dark enough that he doesn't know exactly how much she's offering at this distance, but when it's in his own hands he counts the five hundred dollar bills with Max observing the interaction beside him and asks himself what girl his age carries money like this?

Louise silently steps away and starts in the opposite direction. Billy registers his stepsister's pale hand reaching out too late.

"Max! Come here!" Billy shouts.

But at the same time his hand catches hers, Max's hand has captured Louise's and against his worst expectations she doesn't recoil or flinch or scream out. Max appears fine and this perplexes Billy the most.

"What's your big deal?" She wrenches out of his grip and glares. At any other time, Billy wouldn't have the patience to deal with her outburst, but this entire situation is too awkward to make anything he can say or do be done with an ounce of normality.

As Louise stares wearily at them both, Max hisses:

"You're just going to rob her of her life savings after what she did for you? You suck!"

It could be denial, but Billy thinks on what Louise has done and if any of it was for him. Or if it was all to serve herself so that she'd make it to Hawkins. But, why? Why come to this hick town where the people are too dumb to have anything to hide?

"Let. Go. Max."

"No," Max says and he sees her hand tighten around Louise's. In the presence of a stranger, it's no wonder why she's especially ballsy all of a sudden. "Get lost."

"Stop..."

Max falls silent and looks at Louise. It's a surprise she decides to say anything. It's an even greater surprise when her face is drained of color and blood trickles from her nose and she bats lightly at Max who flinches away.

"Pl-please...d-don't touch me," Louise requests.

She steps back and in her retreat, trips over herself. Her fingers are smeared with the same type of red that ends up falling onto her smock dress as she attempts to staunch the flow of blood dribbling down her chin.

Suddenly, Billy remembers all the times he was a lifeguard for a hotel pool near the bay and that one brat with the nosebleed.

Billy steps forward and his hold on her bicep is firm when he steers her toward the diner, despite her tepid attempts to shoo him away. As a forethought, his hand reaches into his pocket, pulls out the twenty Susan gave him, crumples it and tosses it toward Max. It bounces off her forehead and falls to the ground.

"Get food and be out here by seven," Billy orders.

With a grimace, Max picks up the ball of cash and trails after them for all of three steps when he adds:

"Not here."

"Where am I supposed to eat?"

Billy doesn't need to look over his shoulder, when he says, "Not here."

With that, he's ushering Louise through the diner entrance. That same, kittenish waitress from before greets them, but she doesn't look so thrilled at the sight of Louise's blood coating her fingers. Or maybe it's the sight of Louise in general with his hands guiding her the way they are on the small of her back and her arm.

"Hi, is it two for—"

Billy cuts her off. "Where's your restroom?"

"Uh...Sorry. Our facilities aren't for public use."

But, Billy already sees the sign and he nudges Louise in that direction. The waitress could be glaring at him, but he hardly cares.

. — . — . — .

He drives them both into the men's restroom, sits Louise in one of the toilet stalls, crouches in front of her and glares.

"Wiping your nose like that won't do anything."

Slowly, she lowers her hands into her lap.

"That won't do anything either," Billy drawls.

His next instructions are exact and quick. *Pinch below the bridge of your nose. Lean your head forward.* And Louise follows. Luckily, no one comes in and he assumes it's a slow night for the diner.

Now, he is crouched in front of her, balancing on the balls of his feet, offering wet paper towels which she accepts but does nothing with. She avoids his stare when she asks:

"Are you...still angry?"

She sounds funny with a pinched nose. But, he convinces himself it's not endearing.

"Why do you care?"

"I...want to know...if— if— we're...e-even."

He raises a critical brow. "Even? You ruined my car."

"I p-paid you back though."

Billy shakes his head slowly. "That won't cut it."

He knows she worries. It's the tell in her unguarded eyes and he imagines her mind is running amok.

"Wh...Why? You— you said..."

He reaches into his back pocket for the cash he creases in half. Then, he slips it in her jacket.

"I don't want it."

"Then— what do you— want?" Louise plays into his hand the way she looks at him in earnest. It's sweet how she asks that question and tries to put on a ready disposition.

Billy leans his face forward until he can smell the blood on her skin, a metal tang staining his tongue. The fragrance of soap coming from her hair and her clothes quells his nerves. Billy finds there's a great many things he notices when he's not angry.

"I want to know," he tells her.

Louise eyes him warily. "Know— wh-what?"

The long moment shared in silence as they stare at each other is deafening.

Then, his hand reaches for her, and when she shrinks away, Billy steadies Louise with a firm squeeze on her knee.

"What are you?"

Within her eyes, there's a sad flicker he barely registers.

"You— you shouldn't— know."

"Tell me."

"I...No."

"Tell me," Billy urges, and his hand trails down her knee with deliberate slowness, sliding down to her hem.

"Or I'll touch you." He threatens, his voice low.

Louise visibly shivers. "Pl-please...I-I-I don't want to see...D-don't make me..."

"What don't you want to see?" He asks, growing impatient.

Louise bites her lip in frustration.

"You..." she whispers.

Billy is at a loss for words. With an answer like that he didn't know what to expect. And, then it seems to piece together, not quite perfectly but understanding builds upon him like brickwork. She knew his name not by mere guess, not by passing, but from him. She knew where he lived. His arrival to Hawkins. But, if she could see that, what else did his mind lay bare for her viewing through a simple touch?

Billy rises somewhat stiffly and drags her with him by her elbow to the sink. He turns the faucet on for her. And he needn't say anymore when she proceeds to wash her hands, the rest of her face, scrubbing it with the paper towel he'd given. It seems the nosebleed had stopped.

Billy leans against the bathroom wall and stares at her reflection in the mirror. When she finishes, she cuts off the water and through the glass she eyes him, water dripping from her chin.

"I hate your dress," he says offhandedly.

Louise frowns.

"And your jacket," he adds.

She consciously looks down at herself, notes the blood spots. Her face pinches with discomfort when they both hear her stomach grumble. An impish smirk spreads across his face before he can stop it.

. — . — . — .

Her thoughts are running like havoc in her mind as though each are on fire. But despite the chaos which might be waging her to ruin on the inside, Louise quietly eats fruit from the bowl sitting in front of her as Billy watches.

"Why Hawkins?"

Louise lets the fork dip in her fingers.

She dreads this. His questions. Where is the part she runs? Oh, wait. That's right. She had tried that. And he caught her before her breath could even labor.

"T-to...visit."

She planned to keep her answers vague, but Billy doesn't take it. He's really not as stupid as she thought.

"Visit for what?"

"A p-person."

"A guy?"

"No."

"Have you found her?"

Louise swallows. "No." Suddenly, the strawberry mush in her mouth tastes bad, all sour as it travels down her throat.

"Where are you from?"

Louise can't take it anymore. She fiercely drops her fork.

Billy cocks his head and narrows his eyes.

"What's wrong, kitten?" He taunts.

"Stop asking." She grits out.

Billy leans over the table. His eyes, like stolen pieces of the sky, cloud with a storm as a laugh starts deep in his chest.

"I was wondering if you had a backbone."

Louise looks down at her food and feels a creeping heat in her cheeks at his leer.

She was still hungry, but something about Billy makes her want to stop eating and hide away in a dark corner where she doesn't have to fall victim under his scrutiny.

"Hey."

He hooks her attention with an impatient arc in his voice. She learned that he's very insistent with eye contact, something she's not so well practiced in. With him, it's the hardest. She can't bear to look at him without being lost in the angles of his face, the sharp corner of his jaw, the sun-kissed tones of his skin.

It's too bad, really, that she hates him so much.

"I don't care if you think I'm putting my nose where it doesn't belong." He sounded amused and angry. "Let's remember your sorry ass came to me and you've caused me enough trouble to be let off the hook like some straggler."

"J-just...take my money and l-leave me alone."

He pushes a sigh through his nose and leans back in his seat with his arm propped up.

"No. That's lazy," he says firmly. Then, his hand waves over the waitress who bustles to their table like an eager pet.

"How can I help you?" she asks him, as prettily and all fluffy like her bright red hair, perfect ringlets piled on her head. Her blue-eyed stare and pretty smile is meant for Billy, and Billy returns her display with

a cocky flourish and an easy gaze.

Watching the exchange, Louise feels as she always does when she compares herself to others. Inadequate.

"The check." He says. Pauses. His eyes make an obvious scan of her body. Then, he adds, "Please."

"Oh, yeah, of course." The waitress blushes so hard, her pale skin starts to match her hair.

"Say, what's your name?" Billy asks.

"Cathy," she answers, still standing there.

Billy smirks. "The check," he reminds her.

"Right. Right! I'll be right back— uh— with that."

As the waitress leaves, Billy's charm dissipates when he turns his eyes to Louise.

"You owe me."

"Why?"

He doesn't answer when Cathy the Waitress returns with a small tray holding two mints and the bill. He reaches for his wallet, removes a ten and places it on the tray in exchange for the mints.

"Lemme just get your—"

"The change is yours, darling," Billy says.

"Oh..." Cathy blinks. "Thanks, I guess. You new here?"

Billy smiles, and before he has opened his mouth, Louise takes her fork and stabs it into a piece of melon, eats it. As their chatter reduces to white noise, she finishes what's in the bowl and unbeknownst to her, Billy notes this with a pleased smirk.

"...well, Cathy, maybe I'll take you up on that offer," he says.

The waitress still has that pinky blush and Louise isn't very fond of the color on her. Then, she instantly hates thinking that. Why should she care if Cathy found Billy pleasant and Louise didn't?

" — so, Billy, right? We might have classes together."

"Sure. I wouldn't doubt it."

His saccharine words and Cathy's fluttering eyelashes convinces Louise to swiftly slide out of the booth. As she walks towards the entrance, adjusting the straps of her backpack, she doesn't feel his gaze between her shoulder blades. Only thinks that maybe he's going to give Cathy his number. Maybe he'll promise her a ride in his car. Maybe maybe maybe—

Who cares? Louise thinks.

And in her reverie, she doesn't notice bumping into Max as she steps out into the dusk air and the largely empty parking lot.

The girl jolts back in surprise, and Louise makes a small noise of regret.

"S-sorry, Max. I'm...I'm so sorry. Y-you okay?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm good. Are you? It doesn't look like your nose is..." Max gestures to her face with a frown. "Anymore."

Louise smiles. "Y-yes. I...am...am fine. D-did you eat?"

Max nods. And Louise sees that her posture relaxes.

"I'm sorry you're mixed up with Billy."

Louise shakes her head. "I...asked for it."

Max doesn't approve of her response. "You don't look it. The girls he usually brings home never act like you."

"H-how are they? U— Usually?"

Max hesitates and goes a tad red. "Uh...That's something you'd have

to ask him."

"Oh." Louise says, and then her eyes widen. "W-wait. N-not like that."

"Like what?"

"We aren't...we-we aren't...togeth—"

"Hey!"

Their heads whip around to see Billy marching out of the diner.

"You can't walk out on me after I paid your meal!" He briefly gives Max a black look. "What the hell did I say about talking to her?"

As Billy advances within a fist in front of her, Louise clenches the straps of her backpack so tight the blood vessels rise to the surface of her knuckles.

"Louise, *Louise...*" He intones breathily. The way her name rolls off his tongue is mocking. After he sucks his teeth, his lips curve into a cold smile. "Lousy Louise...It's kinda catchy, isn't it? Can't follow simple orders. Can't talk to save your life."

"Billy, stop it."

"Shut your big mouth, Max." Billy's smile widens when he sees his sister recoil with hurt.

Louise frowns and she wishes her look could harm. "L-leave her alone."

"Oh?" Billy snakes his head back to her. "What with you acting like a kicked bitch all the time, it's surprising you'd even say that."

She can't recall the times she's been angry. It's never come easy to her, but whatever crackles and snaps like fire in her chest, it ignites within her a defiance renewed.

"You would know...all about being— k-kicked like a bitch."

Even when she finds herself on the receiving end of his murderous

glare, Louise regrets nothing.

UP NEXT:

"What? Not gonna go because you'd feel bad about the cute doll you left behind in California?"

Doll. Billy couldn't stop his teeth from gnashing together as he puts the plastic cup down. He made an astonishing effort not to show anyone his dawning annoyance and surprised himself that he didn't fail.

"I don't do 'cute'," Billy replies derisively.

And the girls around him laugh...

7. Chapter 7: Come Too Close

Chapter Seven: Come too close

Billy remembers.

Wispy blonde hair caught in the sea breeze. Sweet ocean greetings for his mother whose smile is his and his alone. Then, the hurricane batters the shore and reaps the warmth from the sand beneath his feet.

Reality saddles back in full swing and Billy releases Louise's neck, having not realized his hand was around her to begin with.

Did he just try to—

— try to choke her?

Max's voice resurfaces, growing louder with every frightened shriek of his name.

"Billy, are you crazy!?"

Louise stumbles to the ground, her nose runs and blood flows freely over her upper lip. Max crouches beside her, pulls at her jacket to draw Louise to her feet who unsteadily tries to find balance on her legs.

Billy blinks and steps back as his stomach lurches with nausea. He turns away from them and catches the waitress in the diner window, gawking. As though he were a monster.

No. No.

Billy spins in the direction of his car and tromps forward like a drunk — *like his father*— his mind under a dizzying spell.

Her spell. Billy thinks.

He needed to get out of there. He needed to be alone. He needs to get away from Louise.

"Louise, stay away from him," Max warns.

But, a hand clasps around his and Billy immediately whirls around to slap her from his skin. Louise doesn't back away in alarm. One hand pinches her nose as he had instructed. Her black eyes gleaming as she looks at him.

"I'm...s-sorry." Her knowing look is trimmed with pity.

For every step she advances, he takes double the amount back. Until the car bumper hits the back of his knees.

"Stay away from me."

Billy hears that the words are his own, but can't stop seeing the image of his mother crawling away from curled fists and a breath which reeks of cheap beer. He's seen it so many times.

"Billy..." Louise says in a tone mothers would reserve for injured children. "I— I warned...you."

"Get away!" He snaps. "Max! Let's go!"

Billy skirts around the front and fumbles for his keys. Once he piles into the driver's seat, he yells out of his window.

"Hurry up, Max!"

He sees Louise turn to her, says something softly he doesn't hear, and Max wears a stony expression as she hops into the car.

The engine starts and as Louise wipes her nose with the back of her hand, he reverses the car out of the parking lot and doesn't look once in the rearview mirror at the diner. Or at Louise.

. — . — . — .

Later that night, she sits on the bed in her slip, knees pulled up to her chest. Her hand massages the side of her neck where Billy's touch had tried to harm her.

The TV is on. Shadows flicker on her face.

How I should hate you, Louise thinks.

She shuts her eyes from the TV to focus on the whisper of his mother's laughter, a ghost in his mind. Now, in hers. She shivers.

Oh, Billy...

I'm so sorry.

. — . — . — .

The next day is just an opportunity for him to forget the night before. Everything works like clockwork and he functions as well as he can, even if it's not all that normal. As much as he wants to wipe his memories, Billy knows these are childish whims and life doesn't offer anything other than to move forward.

Susan makes breakfast, but he grabs the quickest thing out of the refrigerator and leaves the kitchen.

"I'll be in the car."

Max looks up from her cereal. Susan attempts a loud goodbye in her soft spoken voice, but Billy still can't hear her.

At his car, he tosses his bookbag into the back and sits in the driver's seat with his hands clutching the steering wheel. He stares a hole into the speedometer.

. — . — . — .

And that's how Max finds him when she leaves through the front door, her skateboard tucked under her arm. His face gives away what Max identifies as Billy being in a mood. Easy way around that: don't say a word. No matter how much Louise might linger in her thoughts. Her step brother has never been inclined to converse with her since their parents married. Weird girl with nosebleeds and magic touches isn't going to miraculously change that.

But, five miles away from school, Billy surprises her.

A cigarette is pinched between the fingers of one hand. He blows out

a stream of smoke which is sucked out of the open window.

"Last night didn't happen, alright?"

"What part?" she asks.

He glances at her.

"Everything."

"But, it did."

"Playing smartass doesn't flatter you. I'm gonna say it again. It's for your own good. You focus on school, graduate, and you might settle down on a ranch with some redneck named Joel with four brats along the way. Just forget about last night."

Max's brow scrunches up.

"You don't look like you're convincing yourself."

Billy snorts. "Assumptions are for assholes."

"You're an asshole for taking her money."

Billy bides his time in responding and Max feels less confident about the next clever response her brain formulates.

She looks at him and notices his smile starts like an acid spill on his face.

"Think I need cash so bad, Max? Like your whore mother?"

Max feels the sting. First in her heart. Then, in her eyes.

"That's why she married my dad in the first place, right?" Billy releases a mocking laugh. "That's why we're stuck in this country hole, *right?*" With one hand, he blindly grabs the front of her shirt, pulls her forward. Then he takes his eyes off the road for a moment to see what fear he provoked in Max. Satisfied, Billy pushes her back. "I'm not some charity case. I gave it back, so don't assume I robbed that little freak."

Teary eyes and red faced. Billy sees it all on his step-sister and gloats.

As the camaro pulls up to the school parking lot, the walkways are swarming with students. Once they park, Max steps out first and is quickly lost in the chattering throng of smelly preteens. Now alone, Billy flicks out his cigarette and strides down the hill leading to the entrance of Hawkins High.

A trio of girls ogle him, snickering to themselves, jaws smacking gum. Meanwhile on the middle school side of campus, the public bus halts and first unloads Mr. Clarke. After him, dirty sneakers hop off the last step leading outside, a polite wave is sent to the grumpy bus driver, and Louise walks towards the entrance of Hawkins Middle School dressed in new clothes. This outfit might be more suitable for someone her age.

. — . — . — .

It takes her three hours to find the courage to go up to the front desk. Even then, her heart is thudding.

"Who're you lookin' for hun?" The receptionist eyes her over the rim of her glasses, neck straps swinging lightly from the temples.

"M-my...m...Mm.. Mother's nephew."

"Your cousin?" she clarifies.

Louise nods.

"Well," the pen sinks in her grip. "What's his name?"

Louise is momentarily distracted when a group of passing boys rough house with each other. She studies their faces. Wrong boys, she determines.

"Excuse me?"

Her eyes turn back to the woman at the desk.

"What's your cousin's name?" She repeats impatiently.

"Oh...Uh...W-Will...B-B-Byers."

"And what's this visit for?"

"To...uhm..."

"Wait, don't tell me," her expression becomes terse and Louise panics silently.

"His mother sent you?"

She hardly has time to answer when the woman suddenly throws a look over her shoulder and says to the coworker filing paperwork behind her.

"Lisa, you owe me lunch at Jerry's."

"Joyce at it again?"

"You know it. Three time streak, missy. And she sends his cousin this time instead of his brother. Figured it'd be around the school's lunch break that she'd want to check on him." The receptionist looks at Louise. "Honey, you really should go back. And tell your Auntie to stop wasting your lunchtime. I'll give your teacher a call to excuse you the first fifteen minutes of class. What's your name?"

"N-no, it's fine. I'm only a l-little late."

"I'm sure whichever teacher you have won't appreciate you just waltzing in—"

Louise scurries out of the main office before the receptionist wheedles her into giving a name that doesn't exist. What is she supposed to do now? Hang around until school ended?

Brother.

An idea peals in her head and she pushes through the front doors.

When the bell rings, it's during passing period on her way to the cafeteria, does Max see Louise on her way out, and in the direction of the high school.

. — . — . — .

"So, beach boy, you catch some wild waves down in California?"

Billy sifts through the spaghetti on his tray with a fork.

His eyes trail up the chest of the fiery red-head sitting in front of him.

"Sure. But, definitely not the only thing I'd catch," Billy replies. It wasn't supposed to be a joke, yet those around him laugh anyway.

Her brow quirks amusedly as she worries her lower painted lip with her teeth, and he smirks.

The boy next to him nudges his shoulder. "Man, it's gotta be a drag coming out here to Indiana. I'd hate it."

"Billy, you've gotta teach me how to surf," the redhead says. Her friend off to the side nods excitedly. Tiff, her name was? Billy doesn't try to get it right in his head, because he won't feel bad when he gets it wrong. "Definitely take us out to the coast, yeah? For the summer? We could take a road trip in your sexy car."

"It's a camaro, Vick," one of the boys corrects.

"Still a fucking car."

"That baby's a '78, isn't it?" someone else asks.

Billy doesn't put much effort anymore into the conversation - - his attention had become short-stocked a long time ago. It makes him look forward to the gym. But, the birds still flock because he's the new obsession even though he might not be good at the new kid gig. The girls eye him like candy, and he'll put up the front that's he's really sweet, when actually he's all sour.

"There'll be a party at my place."

Billy looks up, tries to find the airy voice and spots the brunette with fluffed bangs beside him.

"Yeah? When?"

"Tomorrow night," she flips her hair over her shoulder and he can see the side of her neck, the curve of her jaw. "Mommy and Daddy will be gone for a week, and it's Halloween. It'll be rad. So, how about it, newcomer?"

He snorted softly and drank from the cup of water sitting on his tray. When he doesn't answer in the time she would like, her expression turns slightly sardonic.

"What?" she asks. "Not gonna go because you'd feel bad about the cute doll you left behind in California?"

Doll. Billy couldn't stop his teeth from gnashing together as he puts the plastic cup down. He made an astonishing effort not to show anyone his dawning annoyance and surprised himself that he didn't fail.

"I don't do 'cute'," Billy replies derisively.

And the girls around him laugh, hiding the traces of their nervousness — consciously reflecting on themselves on whether they fit that description in Billy's eyes and silently hope they don't. The two boys there grin.

Billy could feel their eyes as he brushed a lock of hair from his face.

"If it's lame," he says lowly, "I'm bailing."

The girl's plastic smile widens. "Oh trust me, you go hard or you go home."

The school bell announces the end of the lunch period and Billy walks to his locker. A familiar brunette stands to his side, denying a timid student access to her books. She says nothing when given a venomous glare and ducks away down the hall. Billy hates how the submissive reaction echoes the behavior of someone else he'd been trying to keep off his mind.

"Billy," the brunette says, bearing a smile. All teeth.

"Tiff."

"It's 'Tina' actually," she casually inspects her nails, "You said you don't do 'cute'. What'd ya mean by that?"

Billy breathes heavily when he grabs his book, a wry smirk playing upon his lips.

"You tried looking up the word in a dictionary?"

Tina laughs.

"Uh, no. I think I know. I just wanted to hear it from you." Through her hooded eyes, he can see her intrigue. "If you don't do "cute" what do you do?"

In the background, books thump to the floor unnoticed. A boy's soft voice fumbles for an apology.

Looking at Tina, Billy is reminded of his type. Flawless faces, fuller figures, lighter hair colors, eyes that don't swallow the sunlight. Her mascara and her shadow give the allure of a woman. He likes her style.

Billy leans in, lowers his face to her ear. "I do fun," he says. "Are you fun, Tina?"

Tina blinks and in a nervous bout which accompanies her blush, she says, "I...I...—" And the rest of her answer is lost from his focus when he hears:

"It's okay. M-my name is...is Louise."

Amongst the various conversations filling the hall, he wouldn't have heard her voice if he weren't looking for it. But, the emptiness in his chest has been giving way to a uniquely unwanted feeling of need, one that couldn't be satisfied by forged smiles and fake faces and flirtations.

His attention swings around the door of his locker and he spots on the other end of the hall two students crouched down to the floor, sharing shy smiles and bubbles of laughter. Each a book in their hand.

"I'm Jonathan," was the meek reply.

At length, he sees the girl in a plaid skirt and suspenders, white button shirt, and knee high socks, hair done in a high ponytail revealing the column of her neck. No bruises. All unblemished, unbattered skin. Billy feels his tonsils contract.

"I'm so sorry, I wasn't looking," the boy takes the book from her and quickly rises.

There's a broad smile Billy had never seen on her before and the heat in his veins is instant and quiet and it simmers.

"Y-you're fine," Louise simpers and her hand is outstretched after she stands. "L-let's start...over?"

It didn't pass his notice she had forgone the orange gloves from the first night he had met her. She's going to do to that kid what she had done to Billy. Use him. See him. To get what she wants. Because she's a manipulative wench and Billy can't understand why he'd suddenly feel guilty calling her that in his head.

Tina's mouth falls agape when Billy neglects her and slams his locker closed. He strides to the couple at the end. When a hand attempts to accept Louise, she sees Billy first and hastily steps away before their touch could be sealed.

"I thought you were looking for a girl," Billy says flatly.

Louise averts her gaze to the ground.

Goddamnit, why can't you have the courage to look at me?

He glares at the boy.

Yes, soft. That's what he was. Soft clothes, soft voice, soft eyes. Billy was certain he could break him as effortlessly as he could snap a cigarette in half.

"You...Who do you think you are?"

"J-Jonathan..."

"What's your last name, moron?"

Jonathan's lips twitch into a frown. "B-Byers..."

"Byers..." Billy repeats with a scoff. "I guess you two are good for eachother." He glances at Louise whose hands are clenched into frantic, uncomfortable fists. "A couple of wusses with a stutter."

Passing students observe the exchange with equal amounts of amusement and worry.

"Billy..." Louise calls— a merciful distraction on her part.

His gaze sharpens on her.

"What are you doing here?" he asks.

She ignores the question and he feels foolish that he let her divert his attention from Byers when she says to the boy:

"I'm...sorry about this. S-see you later?"

Jonathan nods, briskly making way to leave before the situation he hadn't asked for escalates. But, Billy doesn't desist.

"Don't think I'm gonna forget your face."

Jonathan acknowledges with a curt duck of his head and escapes.

Before Billy confronts Louise, there's an amused whistle and when he turns to look at the source of the sound, a student approaches them with his strait-laced girlfriend half a step behind.

"Already off to a great start. What'd he do?" The boy asks, jerking his head to the side to flick back the lush bangs falling into his eyes.

"Not your business." Billy grunts.

Eyebrows shoot up. "Listen, New guy, I know you might think the school's been tripping over itself since you showed up, but this isn't your kingdom to trash."

Billy looks at him appraisingly. "What? And it's yours?"

The boy considers this with a smirk and shrugs. "Ask anyone here."

He feels a light pressure on the sleeve of his denim jacket. Looking down his arm, Louise's expression is beseeching, lined with a hint of impatience. This surprises him.

When the boy pointedly watches them, Billy experiences a dash of embarrassment and wrests his arm back. Louise assumes a look of dejection and the girlfriend notices.

"Hey, are you new too?" She introduces lightly. "Don't think I've seen you in any of my classes before. I'm Nancy Wheeler."

"Hi," she answers. "Louise."

Wheeler looks intent on approaching when Billy's sneer stops her.

"Go bother someone else, will you?"

The girl stops in her tracks, confused.

"Hey," the boy warns. "Don't talk to my girlfriend like that."

"Steve, don't. It's fine."

Billy grins. "Really listen to her, *Stevie*. It might do you some good."

He enjoys the next moment, the one where "Steve" and "Nancy" exchange glances and mutually decide to give in.

"Whatever," Steve turns away with an exasperated huff, taking Nancy's elbow. "I'm not going to be late for class because of this guy."

Billy smirks and then is solemn when he notices that Louise has slipped away. He hunts her down around the corner into a hall that's sparse with students shuffling to their classrooms, too busy to notice them. She yelps when he seizes her by the bicep.

"Thought you could run, kitten?" Billy says harshly into her ear. "You tried that, remember? Didn't work out so well, if I recall."

Louise makes a small noise of protest as he drags her out one of the

exits that leads to the back of the buildings. As the school bell screams into the October air, Billy drives Louise into the brick wall. Her hands shoot out for his face, but he catches both wrists and pins them to her sides.

Billy tuts. "Old tricks, Louise."

"B-bout time you l-learned."

Billy laughs but there's little humor to be found in it. Out of impulse, his eyes rove down her frame. "I see that five hundred being put to use. Can't say if it's for good."

Louise purses her lips, maintains his stare. Billy derives a certain degree of pleasure from this.

"Did you do it for me?" He asks.

"D-Don't flatter yourself," she blurts out.

The haughty change in her nature isn't subtle. The stutter is the only thing convincing him he still speaks to the same wide-eyed little girl from yesterday.

All jokes aside, Billy is serious now. He brings his face closer to her. Smells...

Clean.

"You lied to me." He accuses coldly.

"I didn't."

"Then, who's the boy?"

Louise's brow furrows in her silence.

Billy's hand tighten around her thin wrists.

"F-For someone who wants me to stay away..." she begins. "You h-have a b-bad habit of c-coming too-close."

His lips part but no sounds emerge. Billy is caught in yesterday, even

though he's tried so hard to forget about it. Once he swallows, he realizes his throat had gone dry and looks at hers, searching for some type of assurance— that he didn't actually harm her last night.

Louise must've seen something in him to have caused her to waver.

"I'm sorry..."

He automatically thinks it ironic that she's apologizing.

"Why?"

"For touching you."

He wanted to laugh. Or scream for the impatience which cuts through him like a razor. He wanted to tell her that's she's stupid, she's so inexplicably stupid for whatever compels the words to fall from that small mouth shaped like a rosebud.

"Then why do it if you regret that much?"

"You... scared me." She confesses, a look of paralyzing sadness on her face. "If...If you f-feared someone would harm you, w-would you have — done nothing?"

The question is a trigger to his memories and when he sees her eyes dim, it's a telling sign that she knows the effect it has on him. Because, she's seen them too. Those intimate parts of him forbidden from anyone's knowing, now her privilege. He should feel robbed or violated, but Billy can't muster either sentiment to provoke him into anger.

Billy releases her, aware that he was becoming too accustomed to her presence, that his body is ever more reactive to her closeness. Like this, with no one else watching, his limbs were humming with warmth. It's a phase, he tells himself. He hasn't been laid since he came to Hawkins. Uncomplicated as that. And she's an oddity, and his curiosity is compulsory. That's why he even bothers to speak to her.

Billy steps back and sighs through his nose. Louise looks at him as though he's about to say something. But, nothing comes. He really

has to go to class. His dad will kill him if he discovers he's played hooky. As he walks away, Louise says:

"I...need him."

He stops with his hand on the door handle. "Who?"

"J-Jonathan B-Byers."

Whatever Billy feels is making his heartbeat break out into a bitter riot, he tries to ignore it.

"Good luck then."

"To find her."

Billy clenches his jaw. Was she justifying herself for his sake? Either way, as he re-enters the building with her stare on his back, satisfaction is an inkling in his conscience.

8. Chapter 8: Must he linger

Chapter Eight: Must he linger?

It occurred to her how awkward it looked sitting on the parking lot bench waiting for Jonathan Byers before school ended.

But, the tinny bell distracts her and the students pour from behind and in front of her like a zombified mob, tired from listening to adults drone. In a way, she envies them. Learning was never that simple for her.

All afternoon, Louise scripted a plan of how she'd corner Jonathan Byers and interrogate him about his missing brother—

"Hey, Louise!"

She snaps her head up to the couple walking towards her.

"Whatcha out here for?"

Nancy's smile is in part patronizing, but Louise doesn't mind.

"Jonathan..." she replies. "To...ap-apologize."

She sees Steve raise a brow at Nancy who only brightens.

"Oh...Well, he's probably going to be stuck in school for a little while," Nancy says. "He usually stays after to develop pictures for his photography class. It's a hobby of his."

"Oh," Louise says, looks down at her hands. *Shit.*

She senses Nancy move to sit beside her, thigh to thigh, and a part of her pleated skirt disappears. It's the closeness which makes Louise suddenly nervous.

"Our brothers hang out together. Maybe the next time I see him, I'll tell him you'd like to meet up?"

Louise disagrees with a shake of her head.

No. I don't have time for that. I'll wait here until sundown. I must find her. I must.

"I'll wait then..." Louise says stubbornly. "I...have to do this."

Standing beside Nancy, Steve grumbles and his expression hardens to a scowl and it reminds her bitterly of Billy.

"No, you don't," Steve insists. "You shouldn't be apologizing for that jerk."

When he throws a dirty glance over his shoulder, Louise sees that it's directed several lanes across the parking lot at the very person she dreads. Billy leans against the side of his car, arms crossed over his broad chest, and he tilts his face to their pointed looks and glares.

"Jeez, he ought to send the girls running for the hills," Steve put in.

"Well, you didn't make a good first impression. It's no wonder he looks like he wants to throttle you," Nancy remarks.

"Oh, should I be so lucky," his reply was muffled with sarcasm.

When Louise smiles, Nancy grabs her attention as though she has something to add. And she does, but it makes Louise less inclined to answer.

"You two have a history?"

The question surprises her.

"Uh...Uhm...Billy is just...Well..."

"It's okay if you don't want to say. Just after seeing you two in the hall, the girls are curious. They want to know if Billy's available or—"

"If he has a psycho-ex who stalked him here from another school," Steve provides.

Louise's mouth twists and Nancy shoots Steve a tempered glance. "What he means, I'm sure, is if you're his girlfriend."

If. Louise almost chokes on her spit. Then, she snorts. "Hardly."

She and Billy wouldn't stand a chance in hell.

"But, he's got you on a short leash, doesn't he?" Steve asks.

Worry fills Louise's eyes. Is that the perception? That Billy controls her? Is that why Nancy is giving her this reassuring smile?

"Don't worry," Nancy says, and places her hand atop her resting in her lap before Louise could stop her. "He won't — "

The end of her sentence fades out, and the world rushes past her ears and melts from her vision.

In only her underwear, she feels so incredibly naked and cold, yet the warm body beside her wards away some of the regret she feels for being alive while Barb is not. The newspaper crumples in her fists— the headline its own insult to her friend's memory. LOCAL GIRL RUNS AWAY? How can these idiots be so blind? "Sign here, Ms. Wheeler," the federal agent is stone-faced, and square jawed, and it would probably kill him to show an ounce of sympathy, "The events relating to Hawkins Laboratory cannot be disclosed to anyone. Do you understa—" How can she look Mrs. Holland in the face? "We should make it up to Jonathan." Steve looks at her. "How?" "Well, let's buy him a camera." "Hell no...C'mon Nance, he deserved it...No. No. Not that face...Fine." Barb always tried to stop her from giving into her short-lived whimsies ever since they were in fourth grade. — the forest has never looked so dead, desolate, here these woods which look so familiar, she walks as a stranger— beneath her fingertips the bark disintegrates into a porous black mucus. "JONATHAN" Gray skin. Sharp joints. Face, closed like a flower. It's not a man. Not man. What is that? It's— It's— Must find Barb. "She would never runaway like —" NO. What IS THAT? She looks out the window, sees the shadow. It's only the tree, Nancy, it's only the tree— "She's out there!" "Gone. Gone. Gone." I know you're alive — it can't be— "You can talk to me." But, Mom was never so easy to— Girl in the pink dress floats in the water. Gone. Gone...011...

Enough...

She needs to come back. Drag herself if she must. Shake off the

weight of another's memories from crushing her entirely.

Louise takes back her hand from Nancy's, and slaps it over her nose.

"You're..." Nancy's voice wavers and its given away by her eyes which are electrified with traces of suspicion. . "...Bleeding."

"I think I've got napkins in the car," Steve says hastily as he retrieves them.

As she regains her bearing, Louise questions if she is in part going mad or if Nancy is just highly delusional. But, the touch has never failed her. Mother said she can always know the truth. That is why she was chosen. And, in Hawkins, Indiana, it is dangerous to take anything at face value. Even if it means, doing what she hates most.

"Nancy..." the words are ready to pour out. Louise is ready to be done with this.

"Yeah?" Nancy says.

But, she stops herself when a chill travels down her spine.

What have you gotten me into, Mother?

She lowers her eyes to the ground and doing so puts less stress on her brain.

"Nevermind," she whispers. "M-my...head really hurts."

"Do you have a ride home? We can drop you off."

"I...Please."

As she pinches the cartilage, blood dripping down the back of her tongue, Louise unthinkingly searches for Billy in the scattered mass of students crossing the parking lot. Then, sees a girl sauntering towards him. His face lights up, so warm and inviting and Louise is left with the silly question of why he's never looked at her the same way as he has done with all the girls before her.

Upon seeing her frown, Nancy wonders what had suddenly caused

Louise's demeanor to look so glum, until she forces her gaze to follow hers back to the new boy with the golden curls.

Tch.

Nancy is glad she'd gotten over that stage in her life.

. — . — . — .

"Would you say that girl was fun?"

His smile wavers. "Come again, darlin'?"

"Oh..." Tina says, "Y'know." She turns her head to the side and looks at the walking trio, specifically at the one trailing behind, her plaid skirt fluttering in the light breeze.

"*Her.*"

Inwardly, he groans. He hoped to ignore her, now he can't.

Billy inhales the afternoon air, and exhales a cloud of smoke.

Tina watches him with a gleam in her hungry eyes that are trying to find the things she could use to one up him. In the event that he might drop her out of the blue. Because she understands that Billy Hargrove burns through his pretty catches faster than a fag. But, she's confident enough in her denim skirt and her stuffed bra and her bouncy curls to think she can play his game better than he can.

"What about her?" He says at length, lowering his cigarette.

"She from another school?"

Tina would bet she was— wished she was. But, Billy doesn't give her that satisfaction. He wouldn't lie to make her feel better.

In response, he shrugs nonchalantly, which only brings to light how much he actually doesn't know about Louise. Her home, her motivations, her last name, or her age— trivial facts he'd care less to find out from anyone else.

"You think I want to know?" *Louise probably wouldn't tell him anyways.*

Tina quirks a brow and slides beside him. Her hands take his and lays a piece of folded paper on his palm.

"What's this?" He asks.

"So you can find my house tomorrow, Hargrove." Tina answers. "And, in case you're..." Her painted lips broaden. "Bored."

A burgundy BMW pulls out of the parking lot and passes his car. The passenger sitting in the back holds a wad of tissues to her face.

Billy feels the scowl on his face and he doesn't know where it came from, but his fist closes on Tina's number.

. — . — . — .

"You live..." Steve takes in the building. "Here?"

The motel is just a seedy place for one night stands and other skeptical folks that live paycheck by paycheck. Might be why some parents don't like their kids hanging around this arcade, but it's all the rage. They'd have better luck telling their sons to not read skin mags than stay away from this low town hangout.

Louise nods her head energetically.

Steve ignores Nancy's terse look and shrugs. "Alright. Well, it was nice meeting you, Louise."

"Thank—you," she says as she puts on her backpack and steps out.

"Careful of the..." *Drunkards? Child molesters? Drug dealers?* Steve closes his mouth, thinks, and then opens it again. "Make sure to lock your door."

"Yes."

The backdoor shuts.

"Hey, Louise?"

The girl stops in front of room 020 and turns.

Nancy leans her head a little out the window.

"Weird question, but could I see your wrists?"

Steve's nose wrinkles at the request.

"Nance, what are you—?"

The determined look on his girlfriend's face isn't one he favors to question. When Nancy goes into these modes, he usually never interferes and the select times he had, she wasn't very keen on hearing his input.

The girl walks stiffly back to the car. Unbuttoning her cuffs, Louise steps close enough as she rolls up the fabric to her elbow for Nancy to frown with disappointment.

"N-no tricks up...my sleeve," Louise announces.

Nancy replies with a tight smile.

"Sorry about that."

As she smooths her sleeves and rebuttons them, Louise turns back to her room, takes out the key and slips inside. Even when the car pulls away, Nancy stares at the closed door with her hands closed into fists over her knees.

"Yeah, definitely a weird question," Steve eventually agrees.

Nancy rolls up her side window, staring at the blinds of room 020.

"Don't you think...?" She trails off and looks down at her fingers and flexes them.

"Think what?" Steve asks. "This place looks sketchy."

"Why do you think she was at school?"

"Maybe she wanted to say 'Hi' to her douchey boyfriend. Ex. Whatever. Seriously, she's probably just visiting. She's not going to be

there tomorrow," Steve excuses, but there's hardly any consolation in that for Nancy.

"Do you remember last year?"

He's always liked her doe eyes. But, now they're charged with fear as they stare out the front window. Seeing that, he is sucked back to a time that shouldn't really matter to him anymore.

"Hell, do I remember last year, Nance," Steve replies dryly. The start of the forest scrolls past his window as they drive along the main road leading to Nancy's neighborhood. He tells himself whatever lurks in the shadows of the trees is just the underbrush.

Nancy frowns lightly, but he doesn't see this, not even from the corner of his eye.

. — . — . — .

"How many times did I fucking tell you?"

The thud resounds. Another thud— the slamming of the door. Silence follows and blankets the room in a thick fog.

Louise cowers in the closet. He feels a sense of relief, though he doesn't know where it comes from. Yet it is the sign that draws him from his cove and into the kitchen where he finds her pale hair fanned out on the floor like a pile of goose feathers.

Mom...

He rounds the corner, sees her ashen face. Eyes lidded. Like sleeping beauty. Mom had read that to him once. Handsome prince rescues the princess from the cunning black dragon whose scales are impenetrable.

"Mom."

But, the fairytales are wrong. Sleeping beauty is not protected in the glass box. The dragon always has his way.

As he crouches down, Louise can't cry anymore for her, even as his mother pleads to him with a watery gaze, wet like the ocean, and says,

"Billy...Help me."

Louise gasps, turns over onto her side and coughs into her pillow so hard tears spring forth from the corner of her eyes. Once her body stops shuddering, her breathing steady, she lays in bed for a few moments; her stare reaches out through the glass to the children rushing into the arcade. She likes to open the blinds in the evening—it gives her the chance to see the pretty sunset.

When she rises out of bed, Louise is struck with the mild sensation of vertigo which forces her to sit. *Live in the now*. She tells herself this mantra to ward away the after effects of the Touch. Eventually, it works. Her mind clears. But, it takes longer than usual.

And, for a moment, she hates how deeply Billy is rooted in her mind when she should be pondering the images she gathered from Nancy.

The pale man. Hawkins Lab. 011.

Louise does not want to recall these images either. How is she supposed to believe that there is another world beyond this? For once, she doesn't understand what she sees and it gives her all the reason to escape her room to the bustling arcade next door. All hypnotic noises of games and children, bickering, laughing, yelling distracts her mind and it's all she asks for as Louise pushes through the crowd with a ten dollar bill in her fist. When she makes it to the middle counter, the center piece of the room, a boy that looks at her with a pizza face and bored eyes.

"What do you want?"

"I don't know."

"Then, get in the back of the line."

"I—thought y-you'd r-recommend something."

"And get fired if you get hives? Next." He looks sharply past her.
"What do you want?"

"Box of cherry bonkers."

He reaches his hand into the glass case and slaps a box of candy onto the counter. A pale hand reaches around Louise from behind and a flash of auburn in the reflection forces her to peer over her shoulder at Max.

Louise looks at her, their expressions similarly taken with surprise.

And it's Max who blurts out, "I saw you at school."

Her doe eyes stare at Louise, and there's little kindness to be held in them, only hesitation. Max doesn't know it, but Louise hates Billy for her. If ever a single touch could reveal so much about his behavior toward others, it was hers.

"You're not his girlfriend, are you?"

Louise would smile if the prospect, the possibility that she could be mistaken as his, didn't frighten her.

"No," she answers and though Max appears riddled with questions, the boy at the counter interrupts.

"Can yall move?"

Grumpily, Max marches to Louise's side. She could imagine the girl was as apprehensive as she is. It would make things easier if she left, but Louise misses the opportunity, when Max hones her attention on her.

"How come you bleed so much? Are you sick?"

"No."

"You're weird, y'know that?"

Anxiety ties her stomach into a knot. Louise had never encountered someone so unashamedly blunt. Of course, Max would think she's weird.

"But," Max starts, "I don't think a girl's ever made Billy scared. There's a first for everyone, I guess."

The way she says it, sounds as neither a compliment nor an insult. But, it makes Louise smile regardless.

Then, Max shrugs, holds out her hand.

Louise looks at it then at her.

"Do it."

"Wh-what?"

"Do what you did to Billy."

"I..." Louise gulps. "No."

"Why not?"

She scans the room, suddenly terrified of the people surrounding them. If someone overhears...

"You're keeping it a secret then," Max concludes.

Louise doesn't confirm this, but she doubts she'd have any luck convincing Max if she denied it. The girl almost smirks but what appears on her lips looks more like a grimace. It's as though she'd forgotten how to smile. Louise could almost hear Billy from Max's face alone.

"I have to go," Louise says but Max grabs her sleeve, and thankfully their skin never touch.

"Tell me more."

Don't do this to me, Max.

Louise doesn't have the heart to say it, though. The girl's blue eyes are alight with energy. It's what most children look like when they feel hopeful. How could she deny this?

But, what can she possibly offer to Max? It's not like she was in a position to disclose the situation. How much trouble would that put her in if Mother found out?

Where would that put Max? Would it put her at risk too?

Louise wordlessly weaves to the front of the store, and though Max is no longer holding her, she trails after her heels, and all the while she can't convince herself to be annoyed. Perhaps, she would feel differently had they never touched.

As Louise barges through the door, a blue camaro sits in front of her and Louise halts in her tracks and Max bumps into her from behind. They stumble forward and it attracts the attention of the driver who turns his head to the side and the fates ought to be twisted in their ways, because their eyes meet and Louise never thinks her heart to thunder like a sea.

We must stop meeting like this.